DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 281 201 CS 210 418

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TITLE A Longitudinal Study of Journal Writing in Kindergarten and First Grade.
PUB DATE Nov 86
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Mid-South Educational Research Association (15th, Memphis, TN, November 19-21, 1986).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Developmental Stages; Grade 1; Kindergarten; *Language Processing; *Phonetics; Primary Education; Reading Readiness; *Spelling; Writing (Composition); Writing Exercises; Writing Processes; *Writing Readiness; *Written Language
IDENTIFIERS *Invented Spelling; *Journal Writing

ABSTRACT

The validity of recent research concerning invented spelling, the developmental stages in children's writing, and whether children will attempt writing before reading and continue writing while learning to read were examined. Five developmental stages in spelling have been identified: (1) the precommunicative stage, involving the use of random letters strung together; (2) the semiphonetic stage with letters representing beginning and/or final sounds; (3) the phonetic stage with words spelled the way they sound; (4) the transitional stage, in which visual memory of patterns of spelling was present; and (5) the correct stage of spelling. Five children, of mixed race and socioeconomic backgrounds and ranging in age from five to seven, were involved in a journal-keeping experiment. Near the end of the kindergarten year, their teacher made a journal for each of the children and told them they could write in them daily, about anything they wanted to share with her. The children would then read the stories to her, and she wrote what they said below the child's writing. Later, the spelling was analyzed using Gentry's stages of invented spelling. The journals were continued the following year when the children were in first grade. All five of the children appeared to progress through the stages of invented spelling; they attempted writing before reading and continued to write while learning to read. (Eleven references are included.) (AEW)

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# A Longitudinal Study of Journal Writing in Kindergarten and First Grade

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Paper Presented at the Fifteenth MSERA Annual Meeting
Memphis, Tennessee, November, 1986

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## Introduction

Very early in life children begin marking on paper with paints, crayons and anything they can get their hands on, to write down ideas (Clay, 1979). These markings may have little meaning to adults. However, children are writing or representing meaning in their own way, and frequently wish to read what they have written to others. As they develop they progress from scribbles to drawings which may be accompanied by scribbles, letters or even words (Wood, 1982). In this progression, children develop an understanding that writing symbolizes thought (Eddowes, 1985). Teachers can help foster the belief that these thoughts are worthy of being written down by realizing that children come to school believing they can write and can learn to write just as they learned to talk (Clakins, 1986). By providing time and materials in kindergarten and first grade, teachers can encourage children and help them to learn to write by writing. Young children can develop as writers if teachers recognize and understand the order of development that takes place in spelling and writing.

If encouraged, children will escape the notion that because they do not know the correct way to spell a word or cannot read the printed word, they cannot write. They invent their own spellings, they move through stages in spelling and they develop writing skills while learning to read. Clay (1979) believes writing programs are complimentary to reading programs which stress sentences and meaning. When writing, the child uses letters, words and sentences while putting ideas on paper.

Teachers of kindergarten and first grade are often doubters who do not understand the developmental stages of invented spelling and how reading and writing compliment each other. Doubters view the child as a passive learner and feel certain isolated, measurable skills must be mastered before writing can take place. Children can and do invent writing in a natural process and it would benefit teachers to become knowledgeable of the process in order to provide meaningful experiences for children in writing and reading (Dyson, 1984).

## Statement of Problem

The purpose of this study was to determine the validity of recent research concerning invented spelling, investigate the developmental stages in children's writing and discern if children will attempt writing before reading and continue writing while learning to read.

## Related Literature

If children can talk, they are capable of learning to write and being enthusiastic about it. In many classrooms children are expected to write in an unnatural way (Smith, 1981).

Young children enter kindergarten wanting to write and are at different levels of development. As they develop language skills, children often draw pictures accompanied by scribbles which explain them. They are curious about letters and begin replacing scribbling by using shapes which are like letters, or by writing. At first, the letters may make no sense, but as the children approach five years of age, they become aware of words and begin to invent spelling by using phonetic spellings to stand for the sounds they hear (Wood, 1982).

Charles Read made a study of invented spelling which can help teachers understand the spelling of their children. He found that as early as three or four years of age, children often attempt spelling by using plastic letters, blocks or other alphabet toys (Read, 1971).

Gentry (1985) identified five developmental stages in spelling. They include the precommunicative stage involving what appears to be the use of random letters strung together, the semiphonetic stage with letters representing beginning and/or final sounds (E=eagle), the phonetic stage with words spelled the way they sound (EGL=eagle), the transitional stage in which visual memory of patterns of spelling is present (egul) and the correct stage of spelling.

While encouraging use of invented spelling, teachers can have children write, remove emphasis from standard or correct spelling and learn how to respond to invented spelling in an appropriate manner, thus enabling children to learn in a natural way. Teachers need to be able to recognize transition between stages and be aware of predictable, natural spelling of words that are non-standard (Gentry and Henderson, 1978). They can encourage critical thinking and language development through social interaction and invented spelling (Kamii and Randazzo, 1985). Journal writing is another way to help young children write and develop language through invented spelling (Hipple, 1985).

Graves (1983) advised teachers to remember the writing is the child's, children can help each other in writing, the teacher can write and share writing problems with the students, children will acquire punctuation and spelling skills, the content rather than mechanics is the focus and folders are useful for organizing children's writings.

There is a need for longitudinal studies of children who are allowed to use invented spelling in their early years of schooling, to determine if there is any effect on standard spelling (Wood, 1982).

## Methods

### Subjects

This study involved five children during their kindergarten and first grade years in a suburban school in a large Southern city. At the time journals were kept, Brandon, Brooke, Natalie, Janice and Erskine were five, six and seven years old. They were racially mixed, both black and caucasian and were from middle class and low socioeconomic families.

### Methods

Near the end of the kindergarten year, the teacher, as suggested by Hipple (1985), started journal writing in her class. She made a journal for each of the children and told them they could write in them daily, about anything they wanted to share with the teacher. She asked them to read their stories to her. The teacher wrote what they said above or below the child's writing. Later, the teacher analyzed the spelling by using Gentry's stages of invented spelling.

The program was continued the next fall when the children were in first grade. The first-grade teacher invited the former kindergarten teacher to her classroom once a month to write with the children. At each session, the former kindergarten teacher began by writing her story on the chalkboard, to share with the children. The story was read and discussed. The children were then asked to share a story with her, which they wrote in journals consisting of newsprint pages kept in a folder. Papers were dated, read to the visiting teacher and what the children said was written correctly above or below their

writing. Later, the invented stages of spelling were analyzed by the visiting teacher and shared with the first-grade teacher.

## Results of the Study

At the end of kindergarten, Brandon was in the precommunicative stage of invented spelling, using random letters to write his stories. By October he had progressed to a transitional stage between the phonetic stage and correct spelling. He used hf to stand for have and introduced vowels in words such as his and dog (he may have memorized these). During March and April he was operating in the phonetic and transitional stages and was reading. In the month of May, Brandon used correct spelling when he wrote, "I am going fishing." Brandon expressed happiness in not having to write on lined paper because of an eye problem which made it difficult for him to focus.

Brooke began her journal in kindergarten using pictures only. By the beginning of first grade she had progressed to the transitional stage and had learned to read during summer vacation. At the end of first grade, she was using a mixture of transitional and correct spelling.

Pictures only were used by Natalie at the end of kindergarten. At the beginning of first grade, she was still in this stage, but had added random letters. By the end of October she had moved to the transitional stage. In May she was using a mixture of transitional and standard spelling.

In kindergarten, Janice was using semiphonetic spelling when she represented words with beginning sounds. Vowels began to appear in words at the beginning of October denoting movement into the phonetic stage. Also, Janice began reading about this time. At the end of October, Janice refused to write and would only draw pictures. She drew pictures until December when she again

demonstrated the phonetic stage, using words with vowels. In May, Janice was using transitional spelling, as well as correct.

Erskine, who was almost a year older than the other four children, used words his older brothers had taught him in his kindergarten stories. By October in the first grade he was demonstrating transitional spelling and by May was using mostly correct spelling with a few transitional words. Erskine started reading sometime during October and November.

## Conclusion

All of the five children appeared to progress through the stages of invented spelling as described by Gentry. They attempted writing before reading, as well as while learning to read. Some of the stages could have been observed less than others due to the fact that children did not write in their journals during the summer months between kindergarten and first grade. Also, in four out of five children, it was noticed that transitional spelling started about the same time reading did. Because a record of the children's writing was kept for only one year and a half, it is impossible to know if early use of invented spelling had any effect on standard spelling.

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